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ABSTRACT

Restructuring the American education system has become perhaps the leading popular proposal for remedying what has been identified as the sorry state of the nation's schools. This term suggests a thorough, even radical, overhaul and redirection of the entire system. But the intent of these proposed strategies is the restructuring--not the destruction--of the historically successful American school system, now fallen on rather hard times. Basic strategies include (1) restructuring curriculum and instruction by raising state standards, using the effective schools approaches, giving priority to early intervention, using electronic technologies to bring education materials and experience to students while at home, and restructuring the teaching profession itself; (2) restructuring the governance and finance of education by altering established control practices, initiating accountability legislation for financial support of schools, and encouraging school and business partnerships such as the adopt-a-school program; and (3) restructuring administrative power hierarchies and allowing parental choice of schools to instigate competition and encourage excellence. Almost all these restructuring strategies seek to preserve the essential integrity of the current school system. (KM)

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THE Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

PROGRAM REPORT

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THE ANATOMY OF "RESTRUCTURING":

STRATEGIES FOR RE-FORMING AMERICAN EDUCATION

A Policy Issues and Options Paper

Prepared for the Chief State School Officers of the Northwest and Pacific

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THE ANATOMY OF "RESTRUCTURING": STRATEGIES FOR RE-FORMING AMERICAN EDUCATION

"Restructuring" the American education system has become perhaps the leading popular proposal for remedying what has been identified as the "sorry state" of the nation's schools. This term suggests a thorough, even radical, overhaul and redirection of the entire system—a systemic, rather than a partial or piecemeal, attack on the admittedly serious problems being faced: inadequate levels of student achievement; too many dropouts; an ill-prepared labor force, inadequately trained to bolster American competitiveness in the world markets; and a growing number of youth disconnected from society, placed at risk because of the disintegrative forces of poverty, drugs, and changes in the patterns of family life, both economic and social.

The popularity of the concept of restructuring education has led to the emergence of a considerable variety of proposed changes in how the schools are structured—so many different proposals, in fact, that the "restructuring" term itself has not developed the sharpness and clarity it needs to serve as a guide to give new direction to the teaching and learning process, to the ways in which the schools are governed and financed, or to the methods of reallocating power and control among the various segments of society which have a legitimately vested interest in what the schools do and how they are run.

Some contemporary critics have sought to dismiss the concept of "restructuring" as just another of the recurrent educational fads, like teaching machines and the "teacher-proof curriculum," one of the critics recently averring that it will "quickly fade into the sunset, . . . lack[ing] the definition or the substance required to maintain staying power."

It is true that the definition of restructuring is not precise, but the ideas that underlie the somewhat loosely used term do have a great deal of substance. Moreover, most of them are being set forth by persons, groups, and organizations of very real substance—governors, legislators, professional organizations, foundation consultants, education governance officials, special-concern groups, professional researchers, and thoughtful and informed citizens.

Not only does the restructuring concept have substance in itself and enjoy substantial support, but it is generally devoid of proposals that might be (perhaps unkindly) described as "crackpot." The basic intent of the proposed strategies is the restructuring, not the destruction, of the historically successful American school system, now fallen on rather hard times.

Almost all of the restructuring strategies which are being set forth seek to preserve the essential integrity of our school system, despite the impassioned rhetoric or inflamed oratory that is sometimes used by proponents of one plan or another. The proposals generally assume that, historically at least, we have been on the right track in fostering a nationwide educational system which exemplifies what the historian Edgar W. Knight proclaimed some 50 years ago to be the fundamental tenets of the American beliefs about what our education system should be:

- free to all
- universal
- compulsory
- publicly supported
- publicly controlled
- nonsectarian

Two of these fundamental principles are, it must be granted, under attack by proponents of some of the restructuring strategies: that education should be compulsory (note the implications of the proposed relaxation or abandoning of state oversight of home schooling) and that it should be rigorously nonsectarian (note the proposals for various forms of direct or subtle aid to church-related schools). It is fair to conclude, however, that the present-day restructurists are not out to destroy American education. Nor are they necessarily either "conservative" or "radical"—they are more like 19th century British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, who when asked which term best described his own beliefs, replied, "I am a conservative to save everything that is good, and a radical to uproot everything that is bad!"

Thus, the various restructuring strategies do not at this point need to be accepted or rejected outright, nor to be analyzed and judged for their relative merits. Rather, they need to be dispassionately identified, described, and categorized so that they may be fairly appraised.

Each of the proposed changes, 10 of which have been identified below, is a strategy for restructuring or re-forming the entire educational system. In order to give a clearer understanding of them, they have been somewhat arbitrarily grouped into three general categories: curriculum and instruction; governance and finance; and the third a pair of overarching proposals, "empowerment" and "choice," immensely popular but often ill-defined and virtually unclassifiable, which appear at once to embrace aspects of some of the other eight strategies but to transcend them all. Each of the strategies is briefly illustrated with examples of what it proposes to accomplish.

The illustrations of each of the identified strategies will be in very brief, almost cryptic, phrases, but the brevity is just a means of highlighting the essentials of the strategies proposed. In no case is it intended to be judgmental.

One way of approaching the problem of what is meant by the term "restructuring" is to look (as the title of this paper suggests) at its very anatomy—to examine each of the parts which make up the whole. As in any anatomical study, it will be discovered that the separate parts are not really separate, but inextricably interrelated—the selection of one restructuring strategy will inevitably involve some consideration, perhaps even adoption, of another seemingly disparate strategy. And as in any anatomical structure, it will also be discovered that the whole is, indeed, greater than the sum of its parts. Taken as a whole, that is, the fundamental concept of restructuring has a unity and strength that transcends its individual parts.

Restructuring Strategies: Curriculum and Instruction

Raising state standards. "More" and "tougher" are the watchwords of the state standards proponents of education restructuring: more mandated subjects; more credits required for high school graduation; no-pass-no-play rules for extracurricular participation; a return to teaching (and requiring the learning) of "basics" and "values" (as described in the popular Hirsch and Bloom prescriptions); more frequent and tougher assessment programs; an extended school day and school year ("like the Japanese schools"). Higher standards will assure a higher level of student performance across the board.

"Effective schools" approaches. This strategy relies heavily on a large body of research, experimentation, and practice which has become generically known as the "effective schools" literature. Based on the research findings, the approaches have been packaged under a variety of program titles, embodying significant differences in policies and processes, but all marked by a strong reliance on cooperative goal setting, cooperative strategic planning, creation of a safe and disciplined instructional climate, strict attention to promoting "engaged time" as a student response, careful alignment of curriculum and assessment, and collection and use of detailed school and student "profiles" to assure that the entire program is solidly "data based."

Early intervention. A prominent urban superintendent, speaking recently at a national meeting, rested his entire case for "restructuring" education on one basic premise: the schools must give top priority to devising programs which catch the kids earlier in life and absorb a majority of their waking hours. Everything else—all of the other restructuring strategies—is not only subordinate, but probably futile. His audience was so receptive as to suggest their strong agreement with his basic premise: that restructuring education involves primarily establishing a new and more productive relationship with parents and communities through and for the children: start with prenatal services and "parenting" seminars; provide school facilities and services from, say, age three and up; open the school as early as 6:00 a.m., with breakfast served, and keep it open for 12 or more hours to accommodate working parents.

When that kind of relationship with parents and with children has been established, we can move on to other restructuring strategies. Take care of the kids first!

Distance education. "Distance education," which has come to be a widely accepted term for a multiplicity of schemes which employ primarily electronic technologies to bring educational materials and experience to students who are physically "at a distance" from the source of instruction, would probably not rank as a major proposed strategy for restructuring education were it not for the intensity of the conviction of a great many of its proponents. Those most convinced of the efficacy—and inevitability—of satellite transmission of instruction and the use of interactive computers, to name but two of the technologies which might be employed, often tend to see this instructional strategy as a truly revolutionary force, fundamentally restructuring American education by freeing the process from the constraints of time, space, and especially isolation.

Many who do not share this conviction are nevertheless strongly convinced that distance education is an inherently sound idea, useful for many subjects and nearly all students, not just those who happen to be located in isolated, understaffed rural schools. But the true believers know they have found the answer. As one author/vendor of a particular program boasted at a recent distance-education conference, "Our system is the most dynamic concept 20th century educators have ever seen in the rural classroom." Another speaker enthusiastically proclaimed, "Teleteaching. . . permits all of the interaction and dialogue that a Socrates could want."

Such claims are nothing new; every author of an innovative curriculum feels somewhat as did Comenius, the 17th century educator, who compared—with more pride than accuracy—his new textbook, *The World of the Senses in Pictures*, with the invention of printing, declaring that "it will

[now] be no harder to teach schoolboys, in any number desired, than with the help of the printing press to cover a thousand sheets daily with the neatest writing. It will be as pleasant to see education carried out on my plan as to look at an automatic machine of this kind, and the process will be as free from failure as these mechanical contrivances, when skillfully made."

Overeager proponents of any one instructional methodology, from Comenius to the modern professor may, by their excess of enthusiasm, turn some critics off, but it is still true that wholesale adoption of any new instructional methodology could have great impact on restructuring the entire delivery system in education.

Professional renewal. Restructuring the teaching profession itself is one of the strategies which finds most favor as the primary way of restructuring education: "You can't really change education until you do something about the teachers." What that "something" is varies, depending on the speaker. Within the profession the call is most commonly for more autonomy, fewer "professional course" requirements, more time and money devoted to teacher-run staff development programs, more equitable pay, and more favorable working conditions. From outside the profession, the "reconstructionists" want, first of all, to "get rid of the bad teachers—everybody knows who they are!" Getting rid of the "bad" ones (better recruitment, more statewide or national tests, less due-process folderol, abolishing tenure) often seems to outside observers more important than improving the "good" ones.

Yet both the outsiders and the insiders agree that a primary approach to changing the structure of the education system is to change the structure of the way the profession is recruited, trained, upgraded, and rewarded. Notable among the proposals are such as these: break the alleged stranglehold of the colleges of education on the training of teachers (in Texas, for example, limiting by law the number of hours of professional education courses required for graduation); put certification wholly in the hands of the profession; support the national certification of teachers; provide alternate routes to certification of teachers and administrators; install "career ladder" or similar differentiated-pay programs; develop and support "academies" for the staff development of administrators and teachers, independent of control by the colleges of education or the state departments of education.

Each of these proposals, of whatever practicality or merit, represents a calculated strategy to alter radically—restructure—the role of the professional in education.

Restructuring Strategies: Governance and Finance

Control. Some of the boldest proposals for radical alteration of established educational practices center around the question, "Who really should run the schools?" It is not surprising that, among the many persons and groups who feel that control is at the heart of the restructuring problem, there are sharp divisions of opinion about who should be in charge.

The positions currently occupied by those making the suggestions, rather than any overweening and consistent theory derived from relevant research, dominate the discussion. The National Governors Association, which has in the past few years shown a strong and informed interest in education reform, studying the problems in depth and coming out in support of a wide variety of positive initiatives, often reflects the position that control of education must be wrested from the "bureaucracies," by which they mean the state departments of education, the universities, the administrators, and the teachers' unions. Since education is the most expensive of all state government functions, basic control of the enterprise should rest in the governor's office.

The National Legislative Council holds much the same suspicion of the stranglehold of the "bureaucracies," but a quite different view of the proper locus of control. There can be no state education system without an appropriation, and those who make the fiscal decisions should have final say about how the programs are run.

Other proponents of restructuring by radical alteration of traditional control mechanisms have perhaps more modest ideas. One governor recently set forth his plan in a nationally televised program regarding the status of our "failing" school system: let the governor's office take control only of specific "educationally bankrupt" systems, he promised, and he would bring in "the best talent in the country" and "turn the system around." No new money needed!

Still other proponents of changes in the control of education which seem necessary for fundamentally restructuring the whole system are suspicious of the ability of any level or unit of state government to take significant action. Some strategists at the university level believe that no really structural changes will occur until the university itself, under contract with the local board of education, is given the complete control of specified local schools. Some business leaders are sure that no drastically needed restructuring will take place unless the business itself is allowed to run the school (a proposal made on the same program that featured the governor's proposal to single-handedly turn the schools around).

Finally, an increasingly popular proposed restructuring strategy has the community as the controlling body—not the governor, not the legislature, not the SDE or the LEA, but the people!

Finance. This is the simple one! Restructuring the system, some say, is just a pipe dream until persistent, serious inequities caused by inequitable finance formulas are corrected—witness the rash of "thorough and efficient" suits proliferating in recent years. Nonsense, others say: there will be no serious restructuring of education until a simple rule is universally adopted: no performance, no pay! As soon as dropouts are reduced, drugs eradicated, strict discipline enforced, all "bad" teachers dismissed, and test scores equal or exceed the national average—then we have succeeded in restructuring education, and ample funds will flow.

The importance of the debate over finance reform, driven not only by concern with equity but by a resurgence of "accountability" legislation, may be measured by the spread of the movement: over half of the states are now involved in relevant suits or legislation or both.

Partnerships. One proposal for fundamental restructuring of education posits a rebirth of the entire system through sharing: let schools come together with business and industry in a shared agreement of mutual responsibilities for jointly conducted and jointly funded enterprises which will

infuse all of education with a new spirit. "Adopt-a-School" has been a popular example of such a partnership—helpful, worthy in intent, and anywhere from splendidly to only marginally successful. Sharing experts from the private sector as teachers or resource persons in the schools has been another partnership approach. Highly successful in some communities has been the establishment of privately funded "school foundations"—a success measured not only by the money raised and expended for worthy purposes, but perhaps even more by the strength of the "our schools" feeling that develops.

Partnerships have been successful, by and large, but whether they are a means of restructuring education may be debatable. The National Alliance of Business and the Institute for Educational Leadership recently dismissed such programs as "fuzzy altruism," rather than indicators of "systemic change." Calling for more specific plans, the groups recommended more "Boston Compact" types of partnerships, in which business leaders would enter into a compact—almost a contract—requiring that the schools demonstrate that they had met specific reform goals as a condition of receiving the private money.

Restructuring Strategies: Empowerment and Choice

Empowerment. One of the most frequently recommended strategies for restructuring education is that of giving greater "power" to teachers, to individual school sites, and/or to local communities: power to make decisions, power to innovate, power to choose among alternatives, power to free themselves from stultifying rules and regulations.

Such "empowerment," it is asserted, will inevitably bring about fundamental, even radical, changes in how the education system functions—true restructuring of education. Shared decision making, with teachers as full participants in the process, will break the tradition-bound stodginess of education resulting from unilateral administrative decisions. Site-based or building-based instructional management will place decision making in the hands of those most knowledgeable about the problems faced, those closest to the action, bypassing the "faceless bureaucracy" of the central office. Empowering parents not only to make choices about what schools their children attend, but to help decide what goes on in that school will markedly alter the structure of the traditional parent-as-a-bystander arrangement.

Such restructuring, it is granted, will cause some difficult departures from familiar ways of operating—negotiated labor agreements will have to be modified; both state level and district level regulations will have to be relaxed; teachers will need to be willing to cede some of their authority to parents, and teachers and administrators alike will need to be provided with extensive staff-development programs to "empower" them to fulfill their new, unaccustomed roles.

Choice. If there is one overriding, bottom line proposal for effecting fundamental restructuring of American education, it is embodied in the single word: <u>choice</u>. The Secretary of Education has recently reiterated that the <u>only</u> way to bring about real changes in the education system is not through new programs or new money—we have enough now to do the job right!—but through allowing/encouraging/subsidizing parents in the choosing of the school for their children. Many agree with him; many others are strongly opposed.

The supporting argument is simple and, to many, persuasive: with choice, there will be competition, and competition always drives out the bad and the mediocre and encourages the excellent—automatic restructuring!

"Choice" would encourage the development of magnet and special purpose schools, raising the level of educational opportunities across the board. To make these new opportunities widely available, choice should be available on an interdistrict level. But to make <u>any</u> choice equally available to all, some public subsidy would have to be provided—financial incentives such as vouchers, tax credits, or tax rebates, as well as provision for intra- and/or inter-district transportation.

Despite the formidable problems which face a "choice" program (including but not limited to uninformed parental choices, financial costs, church/state issues, and potential resegregation along the lines of race and economic class), the proponents remain assured that this restructuring strategy, while not ruling out other approaches, is workable, fundamental, inevitable.

A Final Word

As promised in the introduction, this paper looks at the various parts of the anatomy of "restructuring" without any attempt to judge which of the parts—the strategies—is good or bad, better or worse, faster or slower to accomplish, less costly or more expensive. These are the decisions that are the province of the policy-making bodies whose judgments determine the direction American education is to take. And these policy judgments are inherently part of the political process—not partisan politics, but the politics which are the chosen American system of allocating or withholding power and resources to get the job done.

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Robert R. Rath, Executive Director
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- Developing and disseminating effective educational products and procedures
- Conducting research on educational needs and problems
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